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“Tree of Life” Stone Replica to be Unveiled During Special Ceremony at Utah Cultural Celebration Center

West Valley City – A special dinner and reception will be held at 5 p.m. on Friday, September 23, featuring speakers from the Utah Mexican Consulate, government officials from Chiapas, Mexico, the Utah state governor's office, the LDS church and West Valley City. The event celebrates the gifting of Stela #5, or the “Tree of Life” stone replica, to West Valley City. The stone has been recreated in precise detail and will be permanently displayed next to the Olmec Head, also a gift from the Mexican state of Veracruz.

Following the reception, the public is invited to the 7 p.m., unveiling of the stone, also at the Utah Cultural Celebration Center, 1355 West 3100 South, in West Valley City.

Izapa Stella 5 is one of a number of large, carved stelae found in the ancient Mesoamerica sites of Izapa, in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, Mexico along the present-day Guatemalan border. These stelae date from roughly 300 BC to 50 or 100 BC, although some argue for dates as late as 250 AD. Also known as the “Tree of Life” stone, the complex religious imagery of Izapa Stela 5 has led to different theories and speculations concerning its subject matter, particularly those involving Pre-Columbian trans-oceanic contact. Though discovered and documented first in the 1930s, the stone is particularly noteworthy because of the controversy created by the proposition by Professor M. Wells Jakeman in 1953 that the stone was a record of the Book of Mormon “Tree of Life” vision.

Documented by Smithsonian archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling in 1941, Stela 5 is composed of volcanic andesite and weighs around one-and-a-half tons. Stela 5 presents the most complex imagery of all the stelae at Izapa. Researcher Garth Norman, for example, has counted “at least 12” human figures, a dozen animals, over 25 botanical or inanimate objects, and 9 stylized deity masks. Like much of Izapan monumental sculpture, the subject matter of Stela 5 is considered mythological and religious in nature and is executed with a stylized opulence. Given the multiple overlapping scenes, it appears to be a narrative.

Mainstream Mesoamerican researchers identify the central image as a Mesoamerican world tree, connecting the sky above and the water or underworld below. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller further propose that the stela records a creation myth, with barely-formed humans emerging from a hole drilled into the tree's left side. The associated seated figures are completing these humans in various ways. Julia Guernsey Kappelman, on the other hand, suggests the seated figures are Izapa elites conducting ritual activities in a “quasi-historical scene”, which is framed by, and placed in the context of, the “symbolic landscape of creation.”

Based on the "Tree of Life" theories put forth by Stirling and others, Brigham Young University Archeology chair and Professor M. Wells Jakeman proposed that the bas-relief image was a representation of Lehi's dream of the tree of life in the *Book of Mormon*. Jakeman published multiple interpretations and theories about the stone during his lifetime and the Lehi theory quickly filtered through Mormon culture. Some Latter-day Saint researchers have claimed that the six figures at the level of the tree represent Lehi's family at the time of the vision, from left to right: Sariah, Lehi, Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi. Four of the six figures are facing the tree, representing those who ate of the fruit in Lehi's vision, and the Laman and Lemuel figures are facing away representing their rejection of the tree. Many other parallels have been drawn between the symbology on this stone and Lehi's vision related in the *Book of Mormon*. Not all Latter-day Saint scholars accept this proposition, and it is rejected by non-Mormon scholars.

West Valley City is the most ethnically diverse City in Utah, and has a substantial number of residents that come from Mexico and the State of Chiapas. In a gesture of friendship and appreciation from the State of Chiapas, and the Chiapas Institute of Utah, West Valley City, and The Utah Cultural Celebration Center was selected as the best place for this reproduction to be displayed. The thousands of visitors to the Center and students who come to learn of other cultures will have the opportunity to experience this unique piece of Art.

For more information about this unveiling or other events or exhibits at the Utah Cultural Celebration Center, call 801-965-5100, or visit www.culturalcelebration.org.

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